

THE VALUE OF ANCIENT ART.

SIR,—I have read with considerable pleasure in *THE BUILDER* some letters animated with a philosophical spirit, "On the Influences which tend to retard the Progress of the Fine Arts" in this country. While I agree with the ingenious author in much that he puts forward, there are arguments employed in Mr. Cave Thomas's last letter which I am loth to see promulgated to the public through the medium of your excellent and widely-extended journal, without some notice and reply. I allude more especially to the war which he wages against the ancient school of painting. "When we reflect," he writes, "how many thousands of pounds have been spent within these last few months on old paintings, and the length of time it takes under the ordinary patronage of modern art to disburse an equal amount, we cannot but deprecate, to the utmost extent in our power, this most unpatriotic procedure."

Now, Sir, I am one of those old-fashioned individuals who think that money alone will not create a taste for the fine arts; and, with all respect for political economy in its proper sphere, venture to doubt whether there may not be exceptions, in the fine arts at least, to that fundamental maxim, that the best article will always fetch the best price. Undoubtedly it were to be wished that it were so; but it has been my lot of late years to observe, too frequently, alas, impure and meretricious art cockered up by unfair means and exaggerated praises into public esteem, while the unpretending merit of those who affect a higher style of art is often neglected and spurned. Want of patronage I cannot think is any evil at the present day: what all would desire is, that the patronage should flow in the purest stream and in the right direction.

It is in this respect that the study of the history of art is valuable. Like all other histories, if hastily read, as a mere array of facts, it serves but little purpose. To read the history, we should study the principles of art; and in passing through each successive age, the impartial student of enlightened mind will find inexhaustible instruction in observing how the paintings of each generation, "*oculus subjecta fide libris*," embody, as it were, "the very age and spirit of the time;" a lasting memorial of the inner life of the painter, and an invaluable supplement to the literature of the day.

"The founders of modern art," observes Mr. Cave Thomas, by which expression I apprehend he alludes to the authors of the great Christian revival of art in Italy in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, "shunned not to appear simple, artless, and dry before the exalted ancients, nor to nourish art in the unapparent bud until the time of grace arrived. Whence comes it that we still behold the works of those ancient masters, from Giotto to the teachers of Raffaele, with a kind of worship and even partiality, if not because the faithfulness of their endeavour, the grand seriousness of their quiet and voluntary confinement, receives from us esteem and wonder?" "To know the principle thoroughly on which the ancient painters worked would certainly, if acted upon, produce works of equal merit, as it is the great feature of a principle that it may be applied in a great variety of ways, and renders no necessity for copying," that is, we presume, "copying unnecessary." Now, this is fine writing, and well said, but for a gentleman who starts by saying that he has outrenched himself against antiquity, the admissions he makes are serious.

1st. That there are in the works of the ancient school of Italy (to which I confine my argument for the moment) a faithfulness of endeavour, and a serious, quiet, modest self-confidence, which excite in us esteem and admiration.

2nd. That a knowledge of the principle on which the ancients worked would produce, if acted upon, works of equal excellence.

It has been my lot to live with, and be upon intimate terms with some of the most enlightened and amiable patrons of modern art; but I have observed amongst them, that in exact proportion as their wish to forward the interests of the artist at the present day warmed and became active, so did their admiration of the ancient masters increase. In some cases I have witnessed a preference for

this or that particular school (as the early Italian), and a desire to impregnate, as it were, the art of the present day with the virtues of that style. In other minds, equally enlightened, I have found a more catholic love for ancient art, which would fain cull from each school those particular excellences most easily adapted to the time and circumstances of the society in which we now live. Both these tempers of mind are excellent, but the latter is, perhaps, the most practically useful, as the former is the most enthusiastic. There are few, however, who love art—I mean high art—in any degree, who have not a deep veneration for antiquity.

The value of the ancient masters consists least of all (and this Mr. Cave Thomas seems to have apprehended) in their execution. As mere manipulators, we are, in many respects, their equals, and in some their superiors; but it is in the conception of their subjects, and in the grandeur of their general treatment, that the artists of Italy (especially) excelled us. Mr. Burke, remarks Mr. Cave Thomas, said that "art can never give the rules that make an art." Undoubtedly, the study of mere pictures, without the study of the book of nature, is an empty task, and it scarcely needed the genius of Burke to enforce so clear a truism; but the question really is, whether the study of pictures does not enable to see and perceive many things in nature which would escape an ordinary observer. For instance, whether in walking through a sylvan glade, we are not involuntarily reminded of a favourite hit by Gainsborough; or whether, at the sight of a golden sky, the mind does not recal the image of some masterpiece (I speak at a venture) of Claude or of Turner. Rely upon it, Sir, it is no mean privilege to see nature with the eyes of those gifted men who have been our predecessors, and to say, with humble spirit, they have laboured, but we have entered into the fruits of their labour. Of all the masters on whose works large sums are expended by the modern connoisseur, none strike me personally as more unworthy of a minute attention than those of Hobbima, and yet I was very much pleased to hear the remark of an acute friend and thorough lover both of nature and art, in society, a few days ago:—"Sir, I never knew Hobbima till I travelled in North Holland, and now I like him, because he reminds me of many pleasant weeks spent there." This was conclusive proof that even Hobbima had great merit.

Burke, Sir, has been quoted; but I fear that practice is better than precept. It is one of the noblest instances of enlightened and generous patronage on record, that that great man—and no less amiable than he was great—at much privation to himself, and during a period when his own circumstances were very straitened, maintained (in conjunction with his brother Richard) Barry, the painter, at Rome, at their sole expense, in order that he might have the inestimable advantage of studying the works of the great masters. No man felt the necessity of this more than Mr. Burke. Speaking of Barrett he says (*Life by Prior*, p. 207). "He does not get forward so much as his genius would entitle him to do, as he is so far from studying that he does not look at the pictures of any of the great masters, either Italians or Dutch."

There are, indeed, in Mr. Burke's letters to Barry, the painter, a maturity of judgment and a soundness of criticism to which you would do good service in calling the attention of young artists at the present day.

Having now extended this letter to a length I never thought of at the outset, I fear I must conclude, though I flatter myself I should have small difficulty in practically illustrating the few home truths I have ventured to put before you. Believe me, Sir, the fault of the present day is not to under-rate modern art.

I will, like Mr. Cave Thomas, conclude with a principle:—"Let us endeavour to understand nature as the most effective course for discovering and destroying all fallacies, and for the revival of truth." Bet it so; but let not our imitation of nature be servile; let us—at least in our works—select the "best parts of the best things." This is the only road to excellence. It has been well said, that no great truth rests for support upon a single argument. You, Sir, as an architect, must be aware that a single column cannot support an

entablature. Two principles, of the least, are necessary. Apply this to art: let our first principle be—study material nature; our second—"study immortal mind." The artist represents, of necessity, only those objects which are material and fall under the cognizance of the senses. To represent them he must have thorough cognizance of their structure; but to endow them with a living soul, and raise art to her proper position as a moral instructress of mankind, he must study the history of his craft, and not merely nature, but books and men.

My anxiety for the welfare of the arts in this country, and the raising of the standard of general taste, must plead my excuse for so long a letter.—I am, Sir, &c.,

AN AMATEUR.

EXPERIMENTS ON THE STRENGTH OF PORTLAND CEMENT.

ON Monday week, according to previous announcement, various experiments were made at the wharf of Messrs. Robins, Aspin, and Co., Great Scotland-yard, of which the following are the more important: several of those in the first series, not recorded, broke down at once, without affording an opportunity of further test, and were therefore regarded as *nil*, as they gave way chiefly in the substance of the brick.

In the first series a better sort of stock bricks were attached by the flat side to a wall, and to each other, with cement, and mixtures of sand and cement, and had stood twenty-seven days with proper supports.

1. *Nil*.
2. All cement: 14 bricks. Heavy iron wheel on seventh brick, said to weigh 9 cwt.: substance of third brick gave way in a few minutes with a small additional weight.
3. One cement, to one sand: 30 bricks, with 10 lb. weight on last brick: stood till 7 lb. weight added, when the brick gave way in three places.
4. One cement, two sand: 22 bricks withstood 1½ cwt. and 11 lb. on the 22nd brick; broke under 3½ cwt.: bricks gave way, also cement.
5. One cement, 4 sand: 25 bricks sustained ½ cwt. on 25th brick till bricks gave way.
6. All cement: 39 bricks, with weight on 38th: equal in all to 40 bricks, when brick gave way.
7. One cement, five sand: 26 bricks, an 8 lb. weight and a 4 lb. added on 26th, equal to 30 bricks. Stood about a quarter of an hour, when more weights added, equal to 35 bricks. Weights taken off, and ½ cwt. put on 26th brick: sustained it till a brick broke under 74 lb. weight in all, with additional slight accidental pressure.
- 8 to 12. (Two of Roman cement included). *Nil*.
13. One cement, one sand, of 24 days' standing: 15 bricks. Borne at each end, and weights attached between: span or bearing 2 ft. 6 in. Bricks broke under weights estimated at 13 cwt., after standing for at least an hour, previous to last addition of heavy cast-iron bars, said to average 1 cwt. each.

The bricks in the next series of experiments were regarded as inferior in quality, and did not appear to support the strength of the cement well: most of these, like the preceding, which were regarded as of better quality, gave way before the full power of the cement had been tested. They were built in bars of 5 feet span, laid horizontally, 3 bricks in breadth, and 3 in thickness, with supports at each end, built on sand, and about two lengths of brick in thickness, from outer edge to inner span. The whole had stood about a month.

1. All cement: loaded by degrees with 58 of the cast-iron bars, or 2 tons 18 cwt., when the bricks broke across in two places.*
2. One cement, five sand: broke in brick and yielded in cement in middle, under a weight of 31 cwt.
3. One Roman cement, one sand: broke in brick and yielded in cement in three places, under a weight of 29 cwt.
4. One cement, three sand: split partially in two places under a weight of 47 cwt., but did not at once give way.
5. One Roman cement, two sand: gave way in cement with a weight of about 21 cwt.
6. One cement, six sand: accidentally struck and hitched at both ends in breaking previous bars: broke in 6 bricks out of 9, under a weight of 24 cwt.

* A fragment picked up consisted of a splinter from four bricks, with the cement like stone, combining them in a cruciform shape.